



The Lincoln Kinsman

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The Maternal Lineage Myth

A SURVEY OF THE EVIDENCE WHICH SUPPORTS THE THEORY
THAT LINCOLN'S MOTHER WAS ILLEGITIMATE

The quest for that spark of genius in Abraham Lincoln which eventually illuminated all about him and which keeps his name forever illustrious has caused men to follow strange and obscure paths in the hope of finding the mysterious flame. Folklore and tradition have contributed largely to three major myths which have developed because of this persistent effort to spy out every conceivable hiding place that might hold some obscure fact about inherited or environmental contributions to the Emancipator.

With a diminishing emphasis placed upon two of the major myths, one relating to Lincoln's origin and another to his father's worthlessness, because of the discovery of duly authorized records which completely destroy the arguments on which the myths have survived, the search for the elusive spark of genius has shifted to Lincoln's maternal ances-

try. Here it is prophesied one may find the clues which will finally solve the riddle of Lincoln's greatness.

The myth briefly stated affirms that Nancy Hanks, the mother of Abraham Lincoln, was the illegitimate child of Lucy Hanks and some Virginian who passed on to Abraham those mental qualifications which allowed Lincoln to excel over all those with whom he was associated.

It will be the purpose of this copy of the *Kinsman* to examine available sources in hopes of discovering possible factors which may have contributed to the origin of the myth and its general acceptance. This will call for a survey of early campaign biographies, the publications utilizing the Herndon manuscripts, the probabilities of what Mr. Lincoln himself may have believed about his maternal ancestry, and a general summary of the evidence based on duly authorized records.

1860 Campaign Biographers' View-points

J. H. Barrett

One of the best known campaign biographers was J. H. Barrett. Shortly after Lincoln's nomination, Barrett interviewed him for the purpose of gathering information for a campaign biography. His book published in 1860 made this reference to Lincoln's mother after stating that she was born in Virginia: It does not appear that the parents of Miss Hanks ever removed to Kentucky, though others of the family did so. Of the history of her ancestry, we have no definite particulars. Her position in life appears to have been not dissimilar to that of her husband. That she possessed some rare qualities of mind and heart, there is reason to believe." (Barrett¹, p. 16.)

In 1895 Mr. Barrett wrote a letter now in the collection of the Lincoln National Life Foundation in which he said: "Mr. Lincoln stated to me in 1861 that his mother was born in Virginia, that she came to Kentucky with some of her relatives and not with her parents but gave me no other clue to her descent."

Barrett then went on to give his own opinions drawn from original researches made in Kentucky in the seventies. He wrote in this same letter: "It appears that she (Nancy) was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Richard Berry of Washington County near Springfield and that Mrs. Berry was a sister of Thomas Lincoln's mother."

When Barrett extended his earlier biography into a two volume work, he made this comment in the introduction: "Recognizing that his parents were of humble life, and ranking himself with plain people, he distinctly

claimed to be of a stock which, though it had produced no man of great eminence, had always been of good repute in general as to both character and capacity." (Barrett², p. IV.)

W. D. Howells

The discovery of a Howells campaign biography which Lincoln had annotated has given some degree of authority to the text. Howells states that Thomas Lincoln married Lucy Hanks. Lincoln crossed out the name Lucy and wrote Nancy in the margin. Howells continued: "Lincoln's mother was, like his father, Virginian; but beyond this, little or nothing is known of her. From both his parents young Lincoln inherited an iron constitution and a decent poverty. . . . It is certain that Lincoln cherished, with just pride, a family repute for native ability, and alluded to it in after life." (Howells, p. 19, 20.) Lincoln allowed the foregoing statement to stand as Howells had written it.

Scripps' Memorandum

One of the first authors to interview Lincoln and put in print the results of his conversation with the Presidential nominee was John Locke Scripps. In his campaign biography prepared in 1860, he made this statement about Lincoln's mother: "Facts in the possession of the writer have impressed him with the belief that although of but limited education, she was a woman of great native strength of intellect and force of character, and he (the writer) suspects that those admirable qualities of head and heart which characterize her distinguished son are inherited mostly from her." (Scripps, p. 2.)

After the President's death Mr. Scripps wrote a letter to William

Herndon, apparently in reply to one which he had received, which contained this paragraph: "Mr. Lincoln communicated some facts to me about his ancestry, which he did not wish published, and which I have never spoken of or alluded to before. I do not think, however, that Dennis Hanks, if he knows anything about these matters, would be very likely to say anything about them." (Lamon, p. 18.)

Herndon's Versions of the Myth

While it might not be possible to prove that the maternity myth originated with William Herndon, however, it is evident that he was the chief source through which the story of the alleged illegitimacy of Lincoln's mother first became public knowledge. On him also rests the responsibility for giving the story wide circulation, and so it is properly classified along with the other Lincoln myths which he sponsored.

There were three men in particular with whom Herndon corresponded to some extent about the revelations Lincoln is said to have made about his mother. The earliest one was C. H. Hart, the second, Ward H. Lamon, and the third, Jesse W. Weik.

Hart Correspondence

On December 26, 1866, Herndon wrote C. H. Hart about Lincoln's maternal ancestry and accounted for his melancholy in this way: "In the first place his grandmother was a halfway prostitute—not a common one, as I understand the facts. I say this is truth, for Mr. Lincoln told me so. Mr. Lincoln's mother was an illegitimate. This is truth, for Mr. L. told me so. As a matter of course Mr. L. knew this. It saddened his own mother, and it saddened Lincoln." (Hertz, p. 52.)

To a letter from Mr. Hart, Mr. Herndon replied on March 2, 1867, that Nancy Hanks was a child of "some high blood rake in Virginia." (Hertz, p. 55.)

Lamon Correspondence

Two days before Herndon had expressed to Lamon his immediate need of money, he stated in another letter that Lincoln had told him that Nancy Hanks was illegitimate, "a child of a Virginia nabob." (Hertz, p. 59.) It was a year later, on February 25, 1870, that Herndon wrote to Lamon stating that while he was riding with Lincoln in 1852 on the way to a session of the court in Petersburg, Menard County, Lincoln explained that his mother was illegitimate, and also that Dennis Hanks was illegitimate, and further stated that his (Lincoln's) relatives were "lascivious, lecherous, not to be trusted." (Hertz, p. 63.)

Apparently it was not until March 6, 1870, that Herndon finally told Lamon how Lincoln happened to tell him about his mother's downfall. The year was moved back to 1851 in this instance, but the law partners were nevertheless bound for the Menard Court House to try a case "which required a discussion on hereditary qualities of mind, natures, etc." Herndon wrote that Lincoln turned to him and said, "Billy, I'll tell you something, but keep it a secret while I live." Lincoln then went on to affirm the illegitimacy of his mother and stated that she was the daughter of "a nobleman, so called, of Virginia." Herndon continued that according to Lincoln his mother's mother was "poor and credulous, etc., and she was shamefully taken advantage of by the man. My mother inherited his qualities and I hers." Then Herndon

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EDITOR

DR. LOUIS A. WARREN,

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SUBJECTS DISCUSSED IN FORMER ISSUES OF THE LINCOLN KINSMAN

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claimed that Lincoln concluded with that oft-repeated statement, "All that I am or hope ever to be I get from my mother, God bless her." (Hertz, p. 73, 74.)

Herndon claimed that Lincoln drew the conclusion from this revelation that illegitimate children were generally "smarter, shrewder, and more intellectual than others." (Hertz, p. 74.)

Weik Correspondence

Although Herndon had been corresponding with Jesse W. Weik for nearly five years, it was not until January 19, 1836, that he discussed in a letter the history of Lincoln's maternity and told Weik that Nancy Hanks was the daughter of "a Vir-

ginia planter." Herndon then described Lincoln's mother as a "bold, reckless, daredevil kind of a woman, stepping to the very verge of propriety; she was badly and roughly raised, was an excellent woman and by nature an intellectual and sensitive woman." (Hertz, p. 139.)

Herndon advised Weik when their book was nearing completion that he was "in favor of striking out all mention of her (Nancy Hanks) illegitimacy and unchastity *if such is the fact.*" Herndon further continued, "No one will get mad because we suppress Nancy Hanks' illegitimacy or unchastity, *if true,*" and then went on to say how furious people would become if it were released. (Hertz, p. 226-227. Italics mine, Ed.)

It is interesting to note that in this same letter Herndon made it plain to Weik that whatever he did with the illegitimacy story should be done with the interest of the success of the book in mind. Instead of eliminating the story, Weik displayed it most prominently, using the first four pages of the first chapter to give it emphasis.

Lincoln's Knowledge of the Hanks Family History

The fact that some conclusions are to be drawn about what Lincoln believed with reference to his mother's family is not intended to affirm the statement that he told what he knew about his people to William Herndon in the "early fifties" or at any other time. Historical procedure at least would not allow one to rest the complete authority for Lincoln's maternal ancestry upon traditional reminiscences of some one outside the family who made no notes until fifteen years after certain casual statements were made and who was still attempting to

add some details to the story thirty-five years after an incident occurred.

Abraham Lincoln was but nine years of age when his mother passed away, and it seems very unlikely that at this early age he had heard from her the story of his discredited ancestry. Certainly after her death, with a new stepmother in the home, there would be no tendency on the part of Lincoln's father to discuss his first wife's relationships. If Abraham did learn anything about his mother's people at any time, it was probably through Dennis and John Hanks, although it does not seem likely that there was any call to go into the study of family genealogy until Abraham had been nominated for the Presidency.

Dennis Hanks insisted that Lincoln's mother's name was Nancy Sparrow who married Thomas Lincoln, and he said that the biographers who called her Hanks were wrong. Dennis claimed that she was the daughter of Henry and Lucy Sparrow and that Henry Sparrow's wife was before her marriage Lucy Hanks. He then insisted that the stories "charging wrong or indecency, prostitution in any of the above families is false" and laid the story to political enemies and traitors. (See *Kinsman* No. 11.)

Herndon began to question Dennis further about the parentage of Lincoln's mother, but he was never able to shake him loose from the original statement. The reply of Dennis to Herndon on February 28, 1866, confirms the former statement about Lincoln's mother; "Hir name was Nancy Sparrow; hir father's name was Henry Sparrow, hir Mother was Lucy Sparrow, hir (Lucy's) Madin name was Hanks, sister to my Mother."

To another question as to why Lincoln's mother was called Hanks, Dennis replied: "All I can say in this She was Deep in Stalk of the Hanks family. Calling hir Hanks probily is My Fault. I always told hir She Looked More Like the Hankses than Sparrow. I think this is the way; if you call hir Hanks, you make hir a Base born Child which is not trew." (Barton, p. 221.)

Both Dennis and John Hanks insisted to the very end that she was not an illegitimate child.

Most authors who have commented on the tenacity with which John and Dennis adhered to the story that the origin of Lincoln's mother was regular have claimed that these two men deliberately lied about her. One would rather believe that they were mistaken or confused about her parentage. If Abraham Lincoln was familiar with their story, as he must have been, he too must have been confused and wondered just who his grandmother really was.

It is quite evident that Lincoln was very sure that the maiden name of his mother was Nancy Hanks and he so wrote to Samuel Haycraft in 1860. It is also likely that Lincoln accepted the story often told and believed by Dennis and John Hanks that the mother of Lincoln's mother, Lucy Hanks who married Henry Sparrow, was a sister of three daughters and several sons of Joseph Hanks, and on this assumption acknowledged his cousin relationship to them.

Whatever Abraham Lincoln may have told John Locke Scripps or any one else about his ancestry, if he mentioned the Hankses, it is very likely he had no positive information about them, as he could not have harmonized the fact that his mother's maiden

name was Nancy Hanks with the testimony of Dennis and John who claimed she was a child of Lucy and Henry Sparrow.

Summary of Herndon's Evidence

As the time for the publication of the Herndon-Weik book approached, it is apparent that Herndon began to waver in his assertions about the illegitimacy of Lincoln's mother. It is well known that he came to question his own theory about Lincoln's illegitimacy and at last is said to have repudiated his own argument. The correspondence which he had with Weik in December 1888 reveals that some doubts were entering his mind about the infallibility of his story about Lincoln's mother's illegitimacy.

In two instances in one paragraph in the letter written by Herndon to Weik on December 1, 1888, Herndon qualifies his charges of illegitimacy with the terms, "if such is the fact" and "if true." Why could there have been any doubt about this question in Herndon's mind, if Lincoln had been as positive in his assertion about his mother's illegitimacy as Herndon represents him?

It has been observed that Barrett gave little credence to the story, Hart ignores it in his biographical sketch, and Lamson makes no mention whatever about any personal testimony given by Abraham Lincoln to William Herndon about his mother's illegitimacy. It is not strange that there are those today who believe that the "buggy-ride story" grew up in the imagination of William Herndon out of the seed sown by Scripps' letter.

If one is not willing to admit the entirely imaginary character of the story, he may at least be conscious of its contradictory features as told by

Herndon at different times. One begins to wonder just what it was that Herndon alleged Lincoln told him about the Hankses in that scene which was supposed to be so vividly impressed upon his mind.

In one of his versions of how Lincoln happened to speak about his mother's origin, he claims that the law partners were discussing a law case to be tried and they drifted into conversation about his mother. But at another time he wrote that he was not even thinking about the case above mentioned when Lincoln abruptly started telling him about his mother's illegitimacy.

In the conclusions drawn by Lincoln in the application of his own family disgrace to the case to be tried in the Menard County Court House, Herndon seems to wonder whether or not Mr. Lincoln was not hinting at his own illegitimacy. How foolish Lincoln would have been to beat about the bush and use his own mother as an exhibit of how brilliant children often come from free love, if he himself was an example of such relations.

Herndon states in his letter to Hart that Lincoln knew all about his own mother's shame as "a matter of course," yet in another letter Herndon admitted that if irregularities occurred among his own kinsmen he would be the last to know about it. It would also be interesting to know how Herndon came by the information that Abraham Lincoln's own mother was greatly humiliated through life by her knowledge of her own illegitimacy. Certainly she did not tell her nine-year-old son about her remorse.

It is of importance to note how Herndon classifies the Virginian, the maternal grandfather of Lincoln, in

the different versions of his story. The grandsire of Lincoln is designated first as a "high blood rake," then as a "nabob," again as a "nobleman so called," and finally as just a "Virginia planter." Letters in files of the Lincoln Foundation claim that this Virginia planter's name was James Hanks, which is probably correct. John or Thomas Marshall or George Washington would be more acceptable as mythical heroes in the Herndon story, and have been so nominated in printed arguments favoring an illustrious maternal ancestor for the President.

It will be observed that Barrett, Howells, and Scripps, early campaign biographers, are in agreement that Lincoln's Hanks ancestry was of good repute, poor but decent, and that admirable qualities of "head and heart" came to him from this source. On the other hand Herndon drew the conclusion from what he claims Lincoln told him that his maternal grandmother was a halfway prostitute and that his Hanks relatives were "lascivious, lecherous, not to be trusted." There can be no question about conflict of evidence here.

Even more conflicting testimony in the various versions of the story, as told at different times by Herndon, is the moral attitude of the grandmother. On one of the presentations as above indicated Herndon introduces Lucy as a halfway prostitute, and in another statement claims that Lincoln told him that she was "shamefully taken advantage of" and shifts the blame for her downfall to her seducer.

Testimony of Duly Authorized Documents

Regardless of what Abraham Lincoln, Dennis Hanks, John Hanks, or

any other member of the Hanks family may have believed about the origin of Nancy Hanks, there is not a single duly authorized public record that sustains the assumption that the mother of Abraham Lincoln was the daughter of an unmarried woman.

There is just one fact about the mother of Nancy Hanks which, if admitted, would allow all the discordant compilations of folklore and traditions gathered about the President's grandmother to come into agreement with all the known official documents which relate to the subject. That fact is that the mother who gave birth to Nancy Hanks was *Mrs.* Lucy Hanks instead of *Miss* Lucy Hanks.

Furthermore the public records, traditions, and folklore of the many branches of the Shipley family would be brought in in harmony with the story, as they have all without exception claimed that the mother of Nancy Hanks was originally Lucy Shipley who married a Hanks.

Still further the acceptance of Lucy as a *Mrs.* Lucy Hanks instead of a *Miss* Lucy Hanks at the time of Nancy Hanks' birth would harmonize the story of Henry Sparrow's descendants who, Dr. Barton admitted, believed Lucy Hanks to have been a widow at the time she married Sparrow.

More important than the testimony of the Hanks, Shipley, and Sparrow families, which would be unified by the simple process of calling Nancy Hanks' mother *Mrs.* instead of *Miss*, is the support such a conclusion would receive from the vast amount of public records which have been gathered. In no single instance would the records violate the story of Lincoln's mother if she is recognized as a *Miss* Lucy Shipley who married a Hanks.

The will of Joseph Hanks which names but three daughters will always stand as an obstacle in the way of those who claim that Lucy was a fourth daughter of Joseph disowned by her father. Joseph Hanks signed his will on January 8, 1793. By this time Lucy had been married to Henry Sparrow two years and eight months and at least one child had been born to them. Does anyone believe that Joseph Hanks would have disowned a married daughter because it was claimed that nearly ten years before she had given birth to an illegitimate child.

There would be no violation of this will if the tradition in some branches of the Hanks family is accepted that Lucy Hanks was the widow of James Hanks, a son of Joseph, deceased at least four years before the will was signed. All the cousin relationships among the Hankses would then be preserved and Lucy, instead of being a sister to the three Hanks daughters, would be a sister-in-law.

The certificate which affirms that Lucy Hanks was of age by April 26, 1790, was signed by Robert Mitchell and John Berry. The Shipley family has always claimed on good authority that Lucy Hanks before her marriage to James Hanks was originally Lucy Shipley with sisters Rachel Shipley Berry, Naomi Shipley Mitchell, and others. The Robert Mitchell on the certificate was the husband of Naomi Shipley and a brother-in-law of Lucy, and John Berry was a son of Richard and Rachel Shipley Berry and a nephew of Lucy. They should be

able to testify about the age of their near kinswoman.

The marriage bond of Lincoln's mother carries the name of Richard Berry, another nephew of Lucy and an own cousin of Nancy Hanks, if the family records of both the Shipley and Berry families can be relied upon. Richard Berry died in Calloway County, Missouri, and has left testimonials about serving as guardian for his cousin Nancy Hanks, the mother of Abraham Lincoln. (See Kinsman No. 16.)

There are other court papers such as the Lucy Hanks indictment, the marriage returns of the minister officiating at Lucy's wedding, the Lucy Hanks marriage bond, and the original license which might be introduced as evidence, and in no single instance is a name of a member of the Hanks family to be found on any of them which would be legally necessary if Lucy Hanks was a single girl and had a father and brothers living in an adjacent county. (See Kinsman No. 2.)

When one approaches the story of Abraham Lincoln's grandmother and weighs the value of folklore and tradition gathered about her on the scale of duly authorized public records, he is bound to come to the conclusion that the mother of Nancy Hanks was Mrs. Lucy Shipley Hanks, and any conclusion which makes the mother of Abraham Lincoln an illegitimate child of a certain Miss Lucy Hanks and some unknown Virginian is but another of the Herndon myths.

J. H. Barrett², *Life of Abraham Lincoln*. Moore, Wilstach, Keys & Co., Cincinnati 1860.

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